

Wife Beating and Modernization: The Case of Papua New Guinea*

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INTRODUCTION

In response to a directive from the Minister of Justice in 1982, the Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission undertook a series of standardized questionnaire surveys to investigate the extent and nature of domestic violence in Papua New Guinea¹. Over 2,000 men and women, representing the diverse population of the country, were interviewed or received postal questionnaires. The impetus for this ambitious undertaking was a resolution passed at the fifth convention of the Papua New Guinea National Council of Women, and communicated to the Law Reform Commission, expressing concern about the apparent rise in crimes against women and the lack of effective remedies.

The Papua New Guinea domestic violence surveys are unique in developing countries, where the vast majority of data comes from ethnographic reports. Indeed, representative surveys focusing on the problem of domestic violence are extremely rare in industrialized countries: the American national family violence surveys (Straus et al., 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986) and the Australian national surveys of attitudes to domestic violence (Public Policy Research Centre, 1988; Elliott and Shanahan Research, 1989; 1990) are perhaps the only examples of *nationwide* domestic violence surveys.

Because of their survey methods and wide coverage of a population at varying stages of "westernization," the Papua New Guinea domestic violence surveys provide a rare opportunity to explore the relationship of wife beating to modernization. To examine this relationship, this paper uses the published quantitative data from the two major surveys, complemented by data from the supplementary studies published by the Law Reform Commission, other ethnographic reports of wife beating in Papua New Guinea, and some comparison material from studies of developing and industrialized societies. It begins with an introduction to Papua New Guinea and women's status therein, and a summary of the survey methods.

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¹ One of the most impressive outcomes of the Law Reform Commission's research has been an extremely innovative and extensive public education campaign targeting the entire population (see Bradley, n.d.).

THE CONTEXT: PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea is a predominantly Melanesian country of about 3.7 million people from more than 700 different language groups and associated cultures, many of whom inhabit remote and isolated areas contacted by Westerners as late as the 1930s. It gained independence from Australia in 1975.

The country is comprised of 19 provinces within four regions. These provinces and regions reflect administrative rather than cultural distinctions, although neighbouring groups tend to display cultural similarities. Eighty-five percent of the population live in rural areas (National Statistical Office, 1991), almost all in villages (Government of Papua New Guinea, 1987:8). The urban population are immigrants from the rural areas, most of whom have settled since World War II (Toft, 1986:2). The capital city, Port Moresby, has a population of nearly 200,000 people (National Statistical Office, 1991) from all four regions. Communication between diverse language groups occurs primarily through the two main *lingua francas* - Melanesian Pidgin and Hiri Motu - although many people, especially in the urban areas, also speak English. English is the official language and is used in formal education. Most (about 87%) of the population depend on agriculture for a livelihood, with only 10% engaged in formal employment, mostly in the urban areas (Government of Papua New Guinea, 1987:12).

Gender Relations and Women's Status

Given the degree of cultural variation throughout Papua New Guinea, the paucity of detailed information available, and limited space, it is impossible to provide an adequate summary of gender relations and women's status in all their complexity. Nonetheless, a number of generalized comments can be made about traditional societies, the impact of colonialism and modernization, and today's rural and urban life. (The following discussion uses material compiled from Bradley, 1985; Brown, 1987; Crossley, 1988; Counts 1990a; Gillett, 1990; Government of Papua New Guinea, 1987; Johnson, 1985; Josephides, 1985a; Macintyre, 1985; MacPherson, 1991; Mandie, 1985; Martin, 1985; Nagari, 1985; Samana, 1985.)

Traditionally, the social organization of Papua New Guinean societies was² based on the clan or kinship group whose members were tied to each other and with neighbouring clans by a system of exchange. The exchange system involved creating and dispersing wealth, and men's status and social relationships were mediated by wealth. Within this context, marriage constituted a contract between two clans, establishing a complex web of reciprocal rights and duties, rather than an (ostensively) private arrangement between two people. Thus, marital matters, including disputes, had political implications, involving the interests of large numbers of people, and the domestic and public domains were not clearly separated.

Brideprice - money and material goods given by the groom's clan to the bride's clan

² For reasons of linguistic convenience, traditional societies are described in the past tense. However, most of the characteristics discussed continue to apply to varying degrees, particularly in rural societies.

- existed in most, though not all, societies, and represented the exchange of rights to a woman's labour and reproductive capacity from her clan to that of her husband's. Rights conferred on a husband by brideprice generally included control of his wife, by violence if necessary, and custody of the children in the event of a marriage breakdown. If a marriage ended, the wife's clan was obliged to return her brideprice. Payment of brideprice thus formalized the marriage, symbolically binding together the two clans. Upon marriage, a woman usually moved to her husband's clan. Polygyny was commonly practised, though its prevalence varied greatly by area. In some societies, a man's status was heavily dependent upon his marrying many women because of the wealth they created. It has been argued that brideprice and polygyny together constituted a strong framework for male dominance and female subordination.

In fact, women worked much longer hours and had less power than men, although their precise roles and access to influence and decision-making differed by group. Women's wide-ranging duties included "cultivating the garden, preparing food, looking after pigs and other wealth, looking after and feeding relatives, giving the husband sexual access, contributing to general family welfare and performing ritual functions when necessary" (Toft and Bonnell, 1985:7). Although men were responsible for some productive tasks such as clearing new lands, and might help with some of their wives' tasks, their main roles were located in the public and political spheres of ceremonial exchange, dispute resolution, and community protection. Men's dependence on women's productive and reproductive labour for their political status was great, though not always publicly acknowledged. Indeed, in some societies, men feared and were actively antagonistic towards women.

Although their influence in social affairs might rest primarily behind the scenes through contributions to their husbands' status and power, women generally had some spheres of autonomous power, even if primarily "negative" ones such as sorcery, noncompliance and disruption. However in some societies, women's formal political influence appears to have been considerable, at times including the ability to assume aspects of a chiefly role in the absence of a male successor. Although access to and control of land and other wealth often depended on men, women in some societies had inheritance rights to land and owned wealth, enabling them to take part in decisions concerning land-use and inter-group exchanges. Moreover, all women had some rights, for example over their own garden produce, and earned personal status through hard work (as well as castigation for being a "lazy wife").

The variations in women's status in traditional Papua New Guinea are often explained in terms of contrasting kinship systems (e.g., Martin, 1985). Women's status in patrilineal societies (which predominate in Papua New Guinea) is said to be much lower than in matrilineal societies where inheritance, and thus ownership of land and children, go through the maternal line. However, inheritance through the maternal line does not guarantee that women in the line have power or status. In fact, there appears to have been considerable variation in women's status within both types of kinship system in Papua New Guinea. (For contrasting accounts of patrilineal societies compare Josephides, 1985a with Mitchell, 1990 and Counts, 1990a; for matrilineal societies compare Bradley, 1985 with Macintyre, 1985). Moreover, there is no evidence that women's power and status were ever equal to men's.

Indeed, the anthropological literature suggests that before colonization Papua New Guinean societies were strongly patriarchal and, moreover, that women were passive and submissive "beasts of burden." However, this view has been countered more recently by the argument that because women's roles were of equal importance to men's for maintaining society, and gender relations were complementary and interdependent, women were not, in fact, dominated. These divergent views may partly be explained by the very real variations described above, as well as by the anthropologists' failure to consider women's autonomous sources of power even in very strongly male dominated societies, and by the failure of more recent commentators to distinguish between cooperation and hierarchy, participation and power.

There is perhaps more agreement that the effects of colonialism and modernization on women's status have, in many respects, been negative. As in other modernizing countries, "development" efforts have focused on men. Western economic systems prioritised cash crops and gave land, education, training, technology and other material assistance to men, assuming them to be the producers and heads of families. Missionaries introduced the Christian model of the monogamous nuclear family which, while advancing notions of love and equal partnership in marriage, also stressed the importance of paternal authority and duty to provide. This male authority was reinforced by western legal systems that named the husband as the "head" of the family and wives and children as his "dependents." Through such processes, women have lost traditional rights to property, resources, and decision-making, and little effort has been made to support them in their life-sustaining productive work. Urbanization of parts of Papua New Guinea has further removed women's access to productive resources, often demoting them to economic dependents of men.

Modernization and "westernization" have clearly brought changes to gender relations and women's status in Papua New Guinea, particularly in areas where contact with outsiders has been greatest. However, traditions remain strong in many rural areas. Women continue to be the primary subsistence gardeners, and they still care for children, look after the household and participate in the exchange system. If anything, their workloads have increased since they also help men with the production of cash crops and earn cash themselves from marketing their own food, sometimes travelling long distances. The kinship system remains strong, and traditional or customary marriages continue, though some people are now married by church or state law, often combined with custom. Brideprice is still common, and polygyny continues although it is declining under the influence of the churches and is illegal under state law.

Urban Papua New Guinea is much more modernized, bringing together people from different language groups and both weakening and redefining traditional kinship relations. In particular, the social and political dimensions of kinship are being replaced by largely personal ties. Under the influence of the churches, western legal systems and the developing market economy, the nuclear family unit is taking over from the clan group as the relationship of prime importance in personal and economic terms. *De facto* marriages, marriages between people of different language groups, and marriages without brideprice are not uncommon. Thus relationships are more insular with less reliance on kin. Nonetheless, almost all urbanites maintain ties with rural relatives and have personal land use rights in their home villages, even though few return except for short visits. Many have *wantoks*

(people from the same language group) living in town who may provide and/or expect support.

Women's productive status and activities also differ in the urban context. Very few urban women are engaged in subsistence work, and whereas only about 1% of rural women are in waged work, 14% of urban women are wage earners (MacPherson, 1991). They are largely employed in traditionally female jobs, primarily clerical work (Crossley, 1988:4). Figures for the mid-1980s show that earnings of urban women were between 49% and 65% (in Port Moresby) of male earnings (MacPherson, 1990, Table 39). Because working wives generally earn much less than their husbands and many unemployed wives have working husbands, dependence on husbands for material support may be very great. However, against these disadvantages, urban living may provide some women with new freedoms and aspirations concerning equality in marriage and public life. Educated women, in particular, may experience a real measure of independence.

Indeed, the National Goals and Directive Principles set out in the 1975 Constitution calls for "equal participation by women citizens in all political, economic, social and religious activities" and "recognition of the principles that a complete relationship in marriage rests on equality of rights and duties of the partners" (in King et al., 1985:454). It is clear, however, that although progress has been made in some areas and women's issues are currently on the public agenda, equality remains a goal rather than an achievement. In addition to those areas already discussed, women continue to lag behind men in education, training and politics. Sixty-five percent of women compared to 45% of men are illiterate (Apelis, 1988:168). In 1988, 45% of all Grade 1 pupils were female, a figure that dropped to just 25% at the highest Grade 12 (MacPherson, 1990, Table 45). Women are very poorly represented in teacher training and hold fewer than 15% of University places (Crossley, 1988:9). Their participation in formal politics is extremely low, even at the local level (Brown, 1987:78-79). Only three women have ever sat in the national parliament, and currently there are none.

Thus, while social change is altering women's lives in both rural and urban Papua New Guinea, there is little evidence that their economic, social or political status has improved overall. Perhaps more significant at the moment is the revolution occurring in consciousness. Particularly (but not exclusively) in the urban context, aspirations concerning equality and women's rights may clash head-on with competing traditional values supporting male superiority and rights, including men's right to beat their wives.

THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVEYS

Three standardized questionnaire surveys were undertaken by the Law Reform Commission: a rural survey, an urban low income survey, and an urban elite survey. Domestic violence toward wives was measured by responses to the following questions: (for husbands) "Have you ever hit your wife?"; (for wives) "Has your husband ever hit you?" In addition, respondents were asked a range of attitudinal and behavioural questions concerning marriage problems and marital violence. Answers were mostly open-ended in the rural survey. Codes derived from these answers were used to construct pre-coded answers for use in the urban surveys.

The Rural Survey

The Rural Survey (Toft and Bonnell, 1985) aimed to cover the wide variation of rural cultural forms throughout Papua New Guinea. All four regions were sampled, although three of the 19 provinces were omitted, one because no Hiri Motu speakers could be found to conduct interviews, one because a detailed study was already being carried out there (Bradley, 1985), and one because it included the urban capital, Port Moresby, which was to provide the setting for the urban surveys. In all, 19 villages were chosen. The data were collected by 19 students at the Administrative College of Papua New Guinea (Port Moresby) who spent one month at their allocated village during 1982. In addition to administering standardized questionnaires, they collected qualitative data, mainly through participant observation (published in Law Reform Commission Monograph No.4, 1986). The total survey sample size was 1,451 (about 13% of the population of the sampled villages), of which 51% were men. Eighty-seven percent of respondents were currently or previously married, although not necessarily to each other, and 91% of men currently married had one wife only. Sixty-seven percent of the married respondents were married by custom only, 21% by custom and church, 11% by church only, and 1% by state law only or in combination with church and/or custom.

The Urban Low Income Earner Survey

This survey (Ranck and Toft, 1986) aimed to cover formal sector low income workers in Port Moresby (primarily men) and wives of workers. All employees of two large companies working in bottling plants, a laundry, steel works, supermarkets, hotels, a quarry, dock yards, a timber yard, garages, and wholesale storage yards were interviewed during working hours by students from the Geography Department at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1984. Electricity Commission employees were also interviewed. Door to door interviews with women were carried out during the day in several low cost housing complexes. All houses were contacted. In all, 666 people were interviewed, of which 55% were men (there are no data indicating the size of the formal low income worker population in Port Moresby). All men and women were married formally or *de facto* (approximately 8%), but not necessarily to each other. Respondents originated from all four regions, but over 60% came from the Papuan region, within which Port Moresby is situated. Thirty percent of men and 39% of women had spouses from a different language group. In about 24% of the sample, both spouses were employed.

The Urban Elite Survey

Postal questionnaires were sent to all married public servants of high rank in 1985, a total of 530 (Ranck and Toft, 1986). Public servants received one questionnaire for themselves and one to give to their wives. Each included an addressed envelope to seal and return the anonymous questionnaire. The response rate was 34% for men and 19% for women. Over 40% of respondents originated from the Papuan region. Fifty percent of men and 43% of women respondents had spouses from different language groups. The employment status of wives was not recorded.

Supplementary Studies

In addition to the main surveys, a number of supplementary studies were included: a

structured interview survey of 50 men and 50 women in two unplanned settlements in Port Moresby (Au, 1986), a hospital study in Lae (the second largest city in Papua New Guinea) in which 94 domestic violence victims and their attackers were interviewed (Ekeroma, 1986), two urban (Port Moresby) case studies of marital violence (Toft, 1986), and several ethnographic studies of domestic violence in Papua New Guinean villages (in Toft, 1985).

Discussion

The main surveys suffer from three major methodological weaknesses. First, because of the enormous difficulties in reaching the population of Papua New Guinea, probability methods of sampling could not be employed. This constitutes perhaps the major limitation of this research, precluding the use of statistical tests and making generalizations to, and comparisons between, the different survey populations hazardous. Nonetheless, attempts were made to ensure that respondents were broadly representative of the populations of interest. The urban elite survey was least successful in this respect because of the very low response rate achieved. Moreover, the data from this survey may well have been contaminated since husbands received questionnaires for their wives. Because of these problems, the survey data used in this paper will focus on the rural and urban low income earner surveys.

Secondly, no detailed, systematic information was collected concerning social organization, gender relations and women's status in each of the 19 villages (but see Law Reform Commission Monograph No. 4, 1986) or in the urban populations sampled. Although perfectly understandable given the research aims and resource constraints, without this information it is impossible to make well-grounded statements concerning the impact of these factors on any variations found in extent and nature of wife beating between villages, or between the rural and urban populations. For the purposes of examining the impact of modernization, this limitation means that the rural and urban samples must be used as rather crude markers along a continuum of modernization.

The final weakness is grounded in the inherent ambiguity of responses gained from fixed-response questionnaires. For example, "hitting" can refer to anything from a limp swipe to a severe beating, and no questions were asked about injury. Whether or not it is justifiable to call hitting a wife "wife beating" is questionable. However, it is clear from the supplementary studies, as well as from a working knowledge of the country, that women in Papua New Guinea are known to be beaten up or "bashed," as it is commonly called locally, by their husbands. Indeed, figures for 1979 through the first six months of 1982 show that nearly one third of *all* homicides in Papua New Guinea were wives killed by their husbands during or following a domestic argument (calculated from figures in Kivung et al.; 1985:79-80). For reasons of linguistic simplicity, the terms "wife hitting" and "wife beating" are used interchangeably in the presentation of data from the surveys.

Ambiguity of response categories also presents problems for interpreting answers concerning reasons and justifications given for hitting a wife. Overall, as will be shown below, the most frequently mentioned response categories were "wife fails to fulfil her obligations," "domestic argument" and "sexual jealousy." These categories are not mutually exclusive. To the extent that a husband's violence is a response to marital conflict, *all* wife beating could be said to be a result of a "domestic argument." Further, a wife may refuse to

fulfil her domestic obligations, for example cooking a meal, because her husband accuses her of sexual infidelity. Moreover, because a wife's traditional obligations to her husband include exclusive sexual access, rousing a husband's sexual jealousy may be deemed a failure of the wife to fulfil her obligations. Finally, there is ambiguity in the category "husband's right," since rights are rarely viewed as unlimited, but are tied to norms regarding a wife's obligations. Fortunately the additional studies contain qualitative material that can be used to help clarify some of these ambiguities.

These methodological weaknesses preclude firm conclusions concerning the extent and nature of wife beating in Papua New Guinea and their relationship to modernization. Nonetheless, the surveys provide a rich source of data and opportunity for speculation.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WIFE BEATING AND MODERNIZATION?

The accumulated evidence from both empirical studies and position papers is that child abuse and spouse abuse are probably most common in Western, industrialized, developed nations. Developing countries also seem to have problems of abuse and violence, but these are interpreted as being grounded in the social disorganization caused by modernization and the resultant changes in family, clan, tribal, and social institutions. (Gelles and Cornell, 1983:161)

The above quote points to two different though related hypotheses concerning the relationship between wife beating and modernization. The first is based in the idea that industrialized societies tend to be socially, economically and politically complex and therefore more subject to conflicts and pressures that lead to family violence (Levinson, 1989:61-2). The second is that rapid social change in modernizing countries creates breakdowns in traditional structures, resulting in an increase in social problems:

It is generally assumed that in non-Western societies industrialization, modernization, Westernization, and the like create social disorganization that leads, in turn, to an increase in social problems, such as crime, delinquency, substance abuse, and family violence. Social change is seen as altering traditional family structures, dynamics, and values that places new and additional stress on individuals and the family and destroys the social support network in which the family was embedded. (Levinson, 1989:63; see also Conners, 1989:29).

The fact that social change is occurring in Papua New Guinea, and that wife beating has recently emerged as a social problem, indicated first and foremost by official requests for research on the subject, suggest that this second hypothesis has some merit. Indeed, the author of the Lae Hospital study proposes two possible reasons for the recent concern about wife beating, both of which involve a breakdown of traditional structures:

Perhaps this mounting awareness of wife-beating as a social problem stems from an increase in incidence, caused by stresses from rapid development conflicting with traditional roles and relationships, or from women becoming

increasingly independent and aware of their rights as citizens, as they break ties with their traditional subordinate role, and speak out on a newly controversial topic. (Ekeroma, 1986:76)

While Ekeroma's first suggestion is congruent with the idea of social disorganization, implying that wife beating is increasing due to the essentially negative impact of rapid social change, his second suggestion points to the more "positive" possibility that modernization may result not in an increase in the phenomenon of wife beating, but in its definition and articulation as a social problem. Reports from ethnographers from the time of contact bear witness to a very strong, if not brutal, tradition of wife beating in many Papua New Guinean societies. Concerning the Tolai people of the Gazelle Peninsula in East New Britain, for example, Bradley writes:

When Europeans first arrived in the Gazelle at the end of the last century, they were shocked at the harsh treatment to which Tolai wives were subjected by their husbands. Tolai men beat their wives frequently and regarded it as perfectly normal.... Numerous cases are cited in the writings of early European observers of men who inflicted severe physical punishments on their wives, even resulting in death. (Bradley, 1985:45)

To the extent that wife beating was an institutionalized aspect of marital relations in traditional Papua New Guinea, the most relevant issues may concern the extent and ways in which modernization has disturbed this institution, rather than whether or not it has produced an increase in wife beating.

In fact, a tradition of wife beating does not preclude the possibility that modernization has made things worse. A number of Papua New Guinean commentators, particularly women, have articulated the belief that wife beating has, indeed, increased in recent times (in Gillett, 1990:37; Counts, 1990b:242-243; Counts, 1992:71-72). They cite a number of reasons: for example, a breakdown of traditional culture and values, disappearance of traditional outlets for male aggression, influx of cash, availability of alcohol, exposure to western films, and western ideas about marriage and women's rights. In particular, they argue that educated women have become more independent and willing to speak up for their rights, leading to new insecurities in men who fear a loss of their traditional dominant roles. Thus, they argue that wife beating is more serious for educated, employed wives in urban Papua New Guinea than for traditional women in rural areas. This argument suggests that women's increasing status vis-à-vis men combined with changes in expectations concerning women's roles and rights may pose a threat to men, leading them to attempt to reassert their dominance through violence. It may be, then, that modernization is resulting in a new definition of wife beating as a social problem *and* in a real increase in this form of violence, and that both of these outcomes are linked directly to changes in women's status and/or aspirations.

Although vastly oversimplifying the intricacy and fluidity of cultural influences in the diverse societies of modern Papua New Guinea, it can be argued that the rural/urban distinction measured in the domestic violence surveys reflects, albeit crudely, different stages of modernization, and thus can be used to explore the effects of modernization on the extent and nature of wife beating.

The Extent and Nature of Wife Beating in Rural and Urban Papua New Guinea: Survey Evidence

Table 1

SURVEY	HOW MANY HUSBANDS HAVE HIT THEIR WIVES ¹	
	MEN ¹ (% who hit)	WOMEN ² (% who have been hit)
Rural	66	67
Urban Low Income	55.5	56

¹ For Rural Survey, answer to the question: 'Have you ever hit your wife?'. For Urban Low Income Survey, answer to question: 'Do you ever hit your wife?'.

² For both Rural and Urban Low Income Surveys, answer to the question: 'Has your husband ever hit you?'.

Source: Ranck and Toft, 1986, Tables 8 and 9, pp. 22, 23.

The rural and urban low income earner (referred to as "urban" below) survey data indicate that wife beating is widespread in Papua New Guinea, regardless of context: two thirds of the rural sample and just over half of the urban sample admitted having been perpetrators or victims (TABLE 1). Further, in the vast majority of cases the violence appears not to be an isolated event: only 24 - 30% of respondents who admitted wife beating said it occurred less than once a year (TABLE 2).

Table 2

SURVEY	HOW OFTEN DO HUSBANDS HIT THEIR WIVES ¹					
	Less Than Once A Year		Once/Year-Less Than Once/Month		Once A Month Or More	
	Men (%) ¹	Women (%) ²	Men (%) ¹	Women (%) ²	Men (%) ¹	Women (%) ²
Rural	26	25	68	68	6	7
Urban Low Income ³	30	24	55	54	15	22

¹ Percentages are based on total number of rural and urban low income husbands who admit hitting their wives.

² Percentages are based on total number of rural and urban low income wives who admit having been hit by their husbands.

³ Urban Low Income Survey percentages are not exact, but *estimates* taken from a graph in Ranck and Toft, 1986, Figures 8 and 9.

Source: Calculated from Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Tables 48 and 49, pp. 77, 78; and Ranck and Toft, 1986, Figures 8 and 9, pp. 33, 34.

There is some evidence that urban living produces *less* rather than more wife beating: about 10% fewer urban than rural respondents admitted being perpetrators or victims (TABLE 1)³ However, when respondents in the urban sample were asked whether their

³ To test the possibility that the lower prevalence of wife beating in the urban sample might be an artifact of the large proportion of Papuan respondents, since rural villages from the Papuan region reported less wife beating on average than villages from other regions, the urban prevalence figures were recalculated by region of origin. The authors conclude that the large Papuan component of the urban sample could not account for the rural/urban difference (Ranck and Toft, 1986:44).

next-door neighbours hit their wives, two thirds of both men and women said yes (Ranck and Toft, 1986, Table 7) - a proportion identical to that of rural men and women admitting wife beating. There are, of course, enormous difficulties in interpreting data of this kind. Perhaps urbanites are less willing to disclose their own violence than are their rural counterparts, but not hesitant to implicate their next-door neighbours, a situation that might suggest that no real differences exist in rates of wife beating in the two contexts. On the other hand, the authors of the urban study note that "the concept of which neighbours are actually 'next door' is possibly ambiguous" (Ranck and Toft, 1986:22). Regardless, the figures give no grounds for suggesting that wife beating is *more* prevalent within the urban context.

However, as TABLE 2 indicates, urban men appear to hit their wives more often than do rural men: between two and a half to three times as many urban as rural respondents said they hit or were hit once a month or more. Again, however, the authors caution that these differences may not be real since "rural life has a timelessness which makes it difficult for respondents to be accurate in such estimates" (Ranck and Toft, 1986:32). Unfortunately, no data were collected on injuries sustained from wife beating, so it is not possible to compare its "seriousness" in the two contexts. However, in the urban context at least, there is indirect evidence that victims may suffer considerable injury: 29% of urban women who had been hit said they had received hospital treatment at least once following an attack (Ranck and Toft, 1986, Table 17).

Table 3

REASONS WHY HUSBANDS HIT THEIR WIVES¹

REASONS	Rural		Urban Low Income	
	MEN Rank ² (%) ³	WOMEN Rank ² (%) ³	MEN Rank ² (%) ⁴	WOMEN Rank ² (%) ⁴
Wife fails to fulfil obligations	1 (37%)	1 (40%)	1 (37%)	2 (20%)
Husband's right	2 (27%)	4 (16%)	5 (5%)	6 (3%)
Domestic Argument	3 (19%)	3 (19%)	2 (28%)	4 (18%)
Sexual jealousy	4 (13%)	2 (20%)	3 (16%)	2 (20%)
Husband drunk ⁵	5 (3%)	6 (2%)	4 (11%)	1 (27%)
Husband's self-defence	6 (1%)	5 (3%)	6 (3%)	5 (5%)

¹ Reasons given by respondents who admitted hitting or being hit.

² Responses ranked from most frequent = 1 to least frequent = 6.

³ Percentages based on total number of responses given. Some respondents gave more than one response.

⁴ Percentages are not exact, but *estimates* taken from graphs in Ranck and Toft 1986: Figures 6 and 7. Figures for Urban Low Income Women do not add up to 100%.

⁵ In the Rural Survey, this category included gambling and financial problems, in addition to alcohol.

Source: Calculated from Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Tables 35 and 36, pp. 65, 66; and Ranck and Toft, 1986, Figures 6 and 7, pp. 30, 31.

Looking at the reasons given by perpetrators and victims for hitting or being hit (TABLE 3), "wife fails to fulfill her obligations" emerged decisively as the most frequently cited factor for all groups except urban women, for whom it ranked joint second. "Sexual jealousy" and "domestic argument" were also mentioned relatively frequently by all groups, while "husband's self-defence" was rarely cited. However, three suggestive rural/urban differences emerged. First, a "husband's right" to hit his wife was referred to far less frequently by the urban sample. The contrast was particularly notable for perpetrators: "husband's right" constituted 27% of responses from rural perpetrators (second only to "wife fails to fulfil her obligations") compared to only 5% of responses from urban perpetrators. Second, "husband was drunk" was rarely given as a reason for wife hitting in the rural context, whereas it was the most frequent response given by urban women who had been hit (27% of responses). Third, while "wife fails to fulfil her obligations" was the second most frequent response given by urban women, these women were only half as likely to cite this reason as were rural women, rural men, and urban men.

Table 4

IS IT ACCEPTABLE FOR A HUSBAND TO HIT HIS WIFE?

SURVEY	MEN (% Yes)	WOMEN (% Yes)
Rural	66	57
Urban Low Income	47	25

¹ For Rural Survey, answer to question: 'Is it alright for a husband to hit his wife with his hands?'. For Urban Low Income Survey, answer to question: 'Is it alright for a husband to hit his wife?'.

Source: Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Table 25, p. 57; and Rehck and Toft, 1986, Table 11, p. 24.

There appears to be a considerable degree of support for wife beating in Papua New Guinea (TABLE 4). The majority of the rural sample said that hitting a wife is acceptable. There is a perfect congruence between the percentage of men who endorsed wife beating (66%) and the proportion of husbands who said they hit their wives, whereas the 57% of women who said wife beating is acceptable is slightly (10%) lower than the proportion of wives who admitted being hit. (It is essential to remember, however, that the perpetrators and victims are not necessarily the same people as those who consider wife beating to be acceptable). The urban sample revealed lower levels of acceptance of wife beating than the rural sample. Slightly less than half of urban men said wife hitting is acceptable (47%), and as few as 25% of urban women agreed. While fewer urban respondents of both sexes said hitting a wife is acceptable than said they had hit or been hit, the difference between attitude and experience was particularly large for urban women, who were more than twice as likely to admit being hit as to say they approved of wife hitting (TABLES 1 and 4). Overall, these findings suggest, first, that women are less likely to approve of wife beating than men and, second, that attitudes toward, or at least social acceptability of, wife beating may be changing in the urban context (most dramatically, the attitudes of women), but have not been matched by corresponding changes in practice.

Table 5

WHAT JUSTIFIES A HUSBAND HITTING HIS WIFE?

REASONS	Rural		Urban Low Income	
	MEN Rank ² (%) ³	WOMEN Rank ² (%) ³	MEN Rank ² (%) ^{3,4}	WOMEN Rank ² (%) ^{3,4}
Wife fails to fulfil obligations	1 (61%)	1 (56%)	1 (38%)	1 (19%)
Husband's right	4 (6%)	4 (8%)	5 (6%)	4 (5%)
Domestic argument/money ⁵	2 (21%)	2 (22%)	3 (12%)	3 (6%)
Sexual jealousy	3 (11%)	3 (13%)	2 (22%)	2 (12%)
Husband drunk ⁶	5 (0.8%)	5 (0.8%)	4 (10%)	5 (3%)
Husband's self-defence	6 (0.2%)	6 (0.5%)	7 (1%)	7 (0.3%)
Wife's job interferes with home life	NA	NA	6 (3%)	6 (0.5%)

¹ Justifications given by respondents who said that it is alright for a husband to hit his wife.

² Responses ranked from most frequent = 1 to least frequent = 6/7.

³ Percentages based on total number of responses given. Some respondents gave more than one response.

⁴ Percentages are not exact, but *estimates* taken from graphs in Ranck and Toft, 1986: Figure 4. Figures do not add up to 100%.

⁵ In the Urban Low Income Survey, 'domestic argument' was replaced by 'money problems'.

⁶ In the Rural Survey, this category included gambling and financial problems, in addition to alcohol.

Source: Calculated from Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Table 30, p. 61; and Ranck and Toft, 1986: Figure 4, p. 27.

Those people who said it is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife were asked to specify the circumstances in which it is justified (TABLE 5). The circumstances given were broadly similar to the reasons given for wife beating by perpetrators and victims: for all groups the most frequently mentioned justification was "wife fails to fulfil her obligations," while "sexual jealousy" and "domestic argument" were referred to relatively frequently, and "husband's self-defence" was hardly ever mentioned. In contrast to the pattern of responses given for actual behaviour, however, a "husband's right" to hit was relatively infrequently mentioned by *any group* as a justification for hitting a wife, and "husband is drunk" received little support from urban women. Moreover, urban men were more likely than the other groups to cite "husband is drunk" and "sexual jealousy" as justification for hitting wives. Finally, "wife fails to fulfil her obligations," while remaining the highest ranked justification for all groups, was cited relatively less frequently by urbanites than by rural respondents.

Discussion

Clearly, wife beating is common in Papua New Guinea. Moreover, comparison with

rates of domestic violence found in two nationwide representative samples in the USA and Britain (Straus et al., 1980:32; Painter, 1991:44⁴) suggests that its prevalence in the urban context is about twice that found in industrialized countries. However, cultural differences in the social acceptability of admitting wife beating as well as methodological differences among the three studies present enormous problems of comparability. Nevertheless, just as wife beating does not appear to be more prevalent in urban than rural Papua New Guinea, so there is no reason to suppose that it is more prevalent in industrialized societies. On the other hand, there is some evidence from the survey data that victims may experience more frequent and severe violence in the urban context.

It may also be the case that wife beating is more common in Papua New Guinea now than in the past. Rural survey respondents (but not urban respondents) were asked whether they felt that husbands hit their wives more today than they used to, and if so, why. Although only one third of the sample said they thought that wife beating is increasing (from Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Table 52), the authors of the survey report suggest that all of the reasons given by this minority for the increase - "breakdown of traditional values," "failure to meet obligations," "sexual jealousy," "influence of alcohol", "influence of cash economy," "polygamy," and "gambling" (Table 53) - are related to rapid social change and modernization (p.50). Moreover, evidence exists in the ethnographic literature that wife beating may be increasing in some Papua New Guinean societies, especially among educated women who are less willing to submit to their husbands' authority than are more traditional women (Scaglion, 1990:202-203; Counts, 1992:72). On the other hand, Josephides (1985b:92), writing about the Kewa of the Southern Highlands, states unequivocally: "In this rural area, I found no evidence that violence towards women had increased in the wake of other social changes."

Whether or not wife beating is increasing with modernization, the survey data concerning reasons, acceptability and justifications for wife beating suggest that urban living may be producing both new problems (for example, the increased availability of alcohol) and new expectations concerning spousal rights and duties (for example, a husband's right to beat his wife is rarely cited in the urban context and fewer urbanites than rural respondents refer to a wife's failure to fulfil her obligations as a justification for wife beating). Urban women, in particular, appear to be challenging traditional understandings of their subordinate role. They are far less likely than all other groups to support a husband's use of force against his wife in any circumstance, and they are the group least likely to explain or excuse wife beating on grounds that they, as wives, have not fulfilled their domestic obligations. More commonly they explain, though do not justify, a husband's violence as a response to drink.

These findings regarding urban women do not necessarily mean, however, that husbands' expectations concerning wifely duties are any less relevant to understanding wife

⁴ The American national random sample survey of family violence (Straus et al., 1980:32) found that 28% of American couples admitted engaging in violence at some time during their marriage. No comparable figures were given for violence to wives specifically (although 12.1% of husbands were found to have been violent at least once during the twelve months preceding the interview, Straus et al., 1980:36). A national representative sample survey of marital rape in Britain (Painter, 1991:44) found that 28% of married women said they had been hit by their husbands at some time during the marriage.

beating in the urban context. Rose, whose story is told in one urban case study (Toft, 1986), maintained that her husband's violence always occurred when he had been drinking. Nevertheless, his complaints concerning her performance of household tasks played a key role in the sequence of events leading up her twice-weekly beatings, after which she often required medical treatment and time off work:

[Rose] says their arguments often start over household responsibilities. He accuses her of not doing his laundry or cooking his food according to his requirements, then she criticises him for spending his time with friends, not being an attentive father and not being prepared to help her with domestic necessities, such as going to the market and carrying back food, when she has a full-time job in addition to running the home. He then tells her she should not "talk back" at him, and the quarrel escalates. (Toft, 1986:106)

While Rose may blame the drink for causing her husband to pick arguments, the issues at stake in these arguments concern his expectations about her domestic responsibilities. What is being contested is his unilateral authority to make claims about domestic obligations. Although not writing specifically about Papua New Guinea, Room (1980) suggests that where alcohol is culturally perceived as removing self-control and thus responsibility for one's actions, it may be a particularly important "instrument to reinforce or reassert intimate domination particularly in a time of at least partial emancipation of the subservient from the dominant" - that is, "where the norms of domination are in flux . . . in periods of transition when the moral legitimacy of rules of domination from a previous era has been undermined (Room 1980:5-6)." Thus, alcohol may provide a convenient excuse for physical domination in the urban context where traditional supports for male authority and wife beating are being challenged. (For further discussion of the relationship between alcohol and wife beating in the Pacific, see Counts, 1990b:243-244).

The survey evidence also suggests that sexual jealousy is more of a problem for men in the urban than rural context: it is cited twice as often by urban than by rural men as a justification for violence. Although a wife in traditional Papua New Guinea would expect to be attacked for an extramarital affair or even a mere suspicion - indeed sexual jealousy was by far the most frequent justification given by rural respondents for hitting a wife with a weapon (Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Table 32) and it is cited by some ethnographers as the major antecedent of wife beating in their societies (e.g., Chowning, 1985:78-79, McDowell, 1990:181) - rural wives may have relatively few opportunities to cause suspicion (Josephides, 1985b:94; Ekeroma, 1986:86). In contrast, urban women may have much more freedom of movement and association. Certainly, the violent husbands in both urban case studies showed an obsession with knowing their wives' whereabouts at all times, constantly phoning or visiting their places of work, and the like (Toft, 1986).

More generally, Strathern (1985) suggests that the extremes of suspicion and obsessive, harassing behaviour shown by the husbands in the two urban case studies can be explained, in part, by the absence in the urban context of explicit community guidelines for defining "justiciable injury" to a husband. In contrast, within the political context of traditional rural life, "the sense of injury might be as vague as a question of 'disloyalty'. But whether this was sufficient grounds for the husband's violence, or whether the wife offered

other provocations, in a community context he could expect support for as well as criticism of his reactions" (Strathern, 1985:3). It may be, then, that wife beating in the urban context is more likely to resemble the patterns of escalation in frequency and severity found in the West (e.g., Smith, 1989:16-17) as the disappearance of community guidelines combines with competing values concerning men's rights and women's duties in a potentially explosive fashion.

Just as men have tangible community help in defining "justiciable injury" in the rural context, so wives in traditional societies may have community support in dealing with "injusticiable" beatings. Because marriage, formalized by brideprice, involves a contract between kinship groups, a wife may receive some support from her clan if wrongly and/or badly beaten. Her kin may actively intervene to stop the beating. Scaglion (1990:202) describes a practice among the Abelam in East Sepik in which village women sometimes intervene in cases of wife beatings culturally defined as abusive by collectively withholding services from the husband. In many areas, if a wife is unjustifiably beaten or blood is shed, the wife's clan may demand compensation from the husband's clan (e.g., Ekeroma, 1986:92; Counts, 1992:67).

The rural survey asked respondents if anyone would intervene to help a wife who was hit, and if so, who and for what reasons (Toft and Bonnell, 1985). Nearly 75% of respondents said someone would help (from Table 44). Of these, about 45% (the largest proportion of responses) said the wife's relatives would be the most likely support (from Tables 44, 45) and over 75% said people would help in order "to protect the wife from being hurt or killed" (from Tables 44, 46). Only about 5% said people would help out of "sympathy for a good wife" and less than 3% said help would be given because "assault is against custom" (from Tables 44, 46).

There are no comparable data on likelihood and sources of support for the urban sample (but see Ranck and Toft, 1986:18-21). Other evidence suggests, however, that kin support may be heavily diluted, if not obliterated, within the urban context (e.g., Doiwa, 1985; Toft, 1986). The wife's relatives very often are simply not near enough to intervene. If the marriage is *de facto* and/or brideprice has not been paid, relatives may feel no responsibility or authority to intervene. Or traditional customs may simply have died, replaced by an understanding of kinship ties as purely personal. In the Lae Hospital study, only 37% of victims with customary marriages had their brideprice paid, and only 16% of all victims had any extended family involvement in their marital problems (Ekeroma, 1986, Tables 13, 17). Referring to the urban case studies (Toft, 1986), Strathern writes: "The harassment which the women suffer is compounded by the fact that the urban and 'Westernised' context for [the marital] relationship fails to provide the kinds of controls on the husband's behaviour which might have been expected in rural society. The wife cannot effectively mobilise kin support, yet when she goes beyond the family to outside agencies, this is a provocation to more violence" (Strathern, 1985:2-3).

Indeed, kinship controls appear, on the whole, not to have been replaced by use of formal state controls in the urban context. Only 18% of women in the urban survey who had been hit said they had reported an assault to the police (Ranck and Toft, 1986, Table 18). Only 34% of victims in the Lae Hospital study had ever sought assistance from an agency

other than the hospital, even though many had been in a violent relationship for years (Ekeroma, 1986:89). Of the 22 victims who contemplated court action, only five followed through (Ekeroma, 1986:87-88). Ekeroma suggests that the women may have been discouraged from taking court action by the police, who regard wife beating as a private matter and the processing of charges a waste of time since victims typically do not show up in court. The wives in both urban case studies (Toft, 1986) had, contrary to the norm, involved the courts, but were severely beaten in reprisal. These findings regarding the inadequacy of informal and formal help in the urban context broadly accord with those from fully industrialized societies (e.g., Smith, 1989).

Nevertheless, it is important not to romanticize traditional kinship relations. In many societies, payment of brideprice gave, and may still give, a husband complete ownership of his wife, her sexuality and labour, as well as the right to control her, and as part of that control, the right to beat her. The wife's relatives may help, but only if she is deemed to be unjustly beaten and/or in danger of being badly hurt; their intervention is motivated by a desire to stop injury and death, not sympathy for the wife or condemnation of the institution of wife beating and the inequality on which it thrives. Wives in traditional societies may thus have no legitimate source of support for much of the violence to which they are subjected (e.g., Chowning, 1985; Josephides, 1985b)⁵. Indeed in some cases, particularly those involving accusations of sexual infidelity, the perceived culpability of the wife may be so great as to preclude intervention by kin even when the violence is life-threatening (e.g., Counts, 1992:67). In other cases, intervention may be motivated by a desire to retaliate against the husband and his kin, rather than by a concern about the beating itself (e.g., McDowell, 1990:178-179). Moreover, even when help is given, it may be limited to interventions that support the maintenance of the marriage. Relatives may not allow the wife to return to live with them because they fear retaliation from the husband and/or loss of brideprice. In any case, a wife who leaves her husband risks losing custody of her children (e.g., Counts, 1992:68).

Overall, then, the evidence from Papua New Guinea suggests that modernization has not resulted in an increase in prevalence of wife beating. Rather, its effects appear to be somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the traditional institutionalized context of wife beating seems to be breaking down. A husband's right to control his wife through violence is no longer accepted unconditionally. Women may have more freedom and autonomy, and greater expectations of equality and companionship in marriage. On the other hand, their

⁵ Some commentators believe that the limitations of kin support in rural Papua New Guinea can be overcome through use of the "village court" system that began operation in 1975 in order to facilitate dispute mediation and settlement by using customary law, unless custom is "repugnant to justice or morality or inconsistent with the National Constitution" (Village Court Secretariat, in Mitchell, 1985:82). Courts are empowered to mediate, impose fines, and issue preventive orders. There are, however, disagreements concerning the ability of village courts to represent women's interests when these conflict with customary law. Counts (1990:244-247), reviewing the evidence, concludes: "It does appear that the court system in Papua New Guinea is becoming more receptive to the needs of women." On the other hand, there is evidence that village courts are using preventive orders to stop wives from leaving their violent husbands, rather than to stop husbands from beating them, and that women who leave their husbands because of violence are being jailed for failure to repay brideprice (*nisil blong meri*, November 1990:1-2. See also Josephides, 1985b). Although the rural survey did not ask respondents who had been hit what action they actually took, all respondents were asked what they thought they would do if attacked. Only 7% of women said they would seek village court assistance (from Toft and Bonnell, 1985, Table 47).

new freedoms and expectations may be producing new insecurities in men, who see their traditional, structurally supported right to control their wives being threatened. Further, these changes are occurring at the same time as men and women are becoming more dependent upon each other in the privatized nuclear family headed legally, morally, and often economically, by the husband. Thus, at the same time as men's authority to beat their wives is becoming less public and clear-cut, their opportunities and perceived need to do so may be increasing. This paradoxical situation may account for the greater frequency of hitting found among men who beat their wives in the urban as compared to the rural survey (to the extent that these urban/rural differences are "real").

THE MEANING(S) OF WIFE BEATING IN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SOCIETIES

We must avoid equating behavior in other cultures with apparently similar conduct in our own society. Although events in Port Moresby or Suva may appear similar to incidents occurring in New York, the cultural meanings of those events are likely to be different. (Counts, 1990c:2).

With this comment, in the introduction to a special issue of *Pacific Studies* on "Domestic Violence in Oceania," Counts argues for the need to recognize the culturally specific nature of wife beating. The corollary of this argument is that wife beating in different cultural contexts may require different understandings. Certainly, the evidence discussed above gives grounds for concluding that wife beating is, in many respects, different in the traditional than in the more westernized context.

Along with other ethnographers, Counts points to two aspects of cultural meaning that are relevant to the issue of modernization. The first concerns cultural variations in definitions of abusive or illegitimate force. It is apparent that in most traditional Papua New Guinean societies, customary marriage law through brideprice gives a permission, perhaps a requirement, that husbands use a certain amount of physical force to control their wives⁶. Ethnographers have noted an institutionalized acceptance of wife beating in many traditional societies worldwide and contrasted this acceptance with an apparent disapproval in the West (e.g., Brown, 1992:2-3; Scaglion, 1990:190), where it is likely to be characterized as deviant or pathological. Certainly, the Papua New Guinea survey results give some indication that acceptability decreases with modernization: the very high degree of social acceptability in rural areas is reduced in the urban context (see also figures for Australia, below). However, if social acceptability is defined by one commonly used index of cultural values - willingness of outsiders to intervene (e.g., Counts, 1990b:227-8) - one must conclude that wife beating sustains a high degree of acceptability in western societies also (see, e.g., Smith 1989).

The second, and related, aspect of cultural meaning concerns the "domestic" versus public features of wife beating. Unlike the "privatized" West, wife beating in traditional societies may be inextricably linked to the political context of kinship. Stresses that lead to wife beating may thus have their origin in larger political imperatives, and "domestic"

⁶ The ethnographic evidence indicates that wife beating is not an accepted/expected practice in *all* Papua New Guinean societies (e.g., Nash, 1990; Mitchell, 1990).

violence may reverberate far beyond the household, as this newspaper item from rural Papua New Guinea dramatically attests:

A tribal fight which started over a domestic argument last week has left one man dead and several houses burnt.

The fight, between the Male and Lakawe clans of Kundis, in the Enga Province, started after a man attempted to axe his wife to death for allegedly "going around with other men."

He wanted to divorce her and asked her clansmen to pay back the bride-price payments, but when they failed to do so, he attempted to kill her. (Papua New Guinea Post-Courier, 21 January, 1987)

A reading of the ethnographic literature on traditional Papua New Guinean societies reveals a sizeable list of culturally specific reasons for which a man beats, or should beat, his wife, that reflect the institutional/political contexts of wife beating. Examples include: to protect his kin's reputation from a wilful or "lazy" woman (Scaglion, 1990); to keep his wife producing shell money for wealth payments that he must continually make to her kin (Chowning, 1985); as part of a requirement to publicly display his ability to control others in order to gain political power (McDowell, 1990); to punish his wife for neglecting the duties she owes his kin because of their heavy contribution to her brideprice (Chowning, 1985). These wider concerns are, it appears, gradually being replaced, especially in the urban context, by stresses involving money, alcohol, the privatized nuclear family, and contradictory value systems. (This does not mean, however, that wife beating in modernized societies is unconnected to the public sphere [e.g., Hanmer and Saunders, 1984:65-70], nor that men in traditional societies may not attempt to keep their marital disputes firmly locked in the "domestic" sphere [Josephides, 1985b]).

Cultural differences in wife beating clearly exist, and claims to universalism can easily become ethnocentrism in disguise. Thus, the final question must be whether these undoubted variations mean that wife beating is a fundamentally different phenomenon requiring a fundamentally different explanation in traditional, modernizing and fully industrialized societies.

⁷ The centrality of this theme worldwide finds support from Levinson's (1989) cross cultural correlational study of family violence. (Of the 90 simple and peasant societies sampled, wife beating occurred "never or very rarely" in only 15.5%, making it "the most common form of family violence around the world" [p31]). Levinson concludes that three types of wife beating exist around the world, defined in terms of the main reason people believe it occurs or should occur in their society. In 39 societies, the main reason given was "the husband's right to beat his wife for any reason or for no reason at all"; in 17 societies, "punishment for adultery or because the husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful"; and in 15 societies, for "a good reason.... [which] often involves the wife's failure to perform her duties or to treat her husband with the degree of respect he expects" (p.34). Levinson found differences among the three types regarding frequency and severity of wife beating, and likelihood of outside intervention. However, no differences were found on the theoretical factors examined. Thus, he concludes that "for theory-testing purposes, wife beating can be treated as a unidimensional phenomenon" (p.35). I go further by arguing that the first two types of wife beating identified by Levinson are in fact instances of "wife's failure to fulfil her obligations", since they are contingent upon it. A husband's unconditional right to beat his wife broadcasts the belief that women's obligations are defined as total submission, and giving a husband exclusive sexual access is a core, if not the core, wifely obligation in most societies.

Returning to the survey data concerning justifications and reasons for wife beating, it is clear that beneath the differences in emphasis (and the undoubted cultural variations that underlie them), a wife's failure to fulfil her obligations stands out as the key theme in both the rural and urban context. Interestingly, this theme predominates, too, in studies of wife beating in western, industrialized countries⁷. The Australian national random sample survey of community attitudes toward domestic violence, conducted in 1987, asked respondents whether the use of physical force by a man against his wife is acceptable, and if so, under what circumstances. The 19% (17% women and 22% men) who said that hitting a wife is acceptable gave one or more of the following circumstances justifying its use: "argues with or refuses to obey him," "wastes money," "doesn't keep the house clean," "doesn't have meals ready on time," "keeps nagging him," "refuses to sleep with him," "admits to sleeping with another man" (Public Policy Research Centre, 1988:23).

The small number of studies in the UK that have systematically examined the sources of conflict leading to violent attacks have found similar constellations of factors, all of which can be subsumed under the label "wife fails to fulfil her obligations." Data from interviews with women at refuges (shelters) for battered women in Scotland indicated that "the majority of the disputes that preceded the violence focused on the husband's jealousy of his wife, differing expectations regarding the wife's domestic duties and the allocation of money" (Dobash and Dobash, 1980:98). When a representative sample of formerly battered divorced and separated women in Northern Ireland were asked how the violence usually started, "by far the largest category of responses . . . (fifty-one per cent) suggested that the violence occurred when a woman failed to do as her husband wished (especially in connection with food, sex and money), dared to question his actions or challenge his authority" (Evason, 1982:32, original emphases). A study of women who had experienced domestic violence in England found that "questioning women's performance of household tasks was the most common event that preceded assaults" (Kelly, 1988:131).

What this abstract category - wife fails to fulfil her obligations - means in practice can be shown by examining actual accounts given by perpetrators, victims and researchers of the conflicts leading up to wife beating. The following examples from Papua New Guinea and several industrialized societies echo countless stories documented around the world:

On one occasion . . . he came in at three o'clock in the morning, dragged her out of bed and beat her because he was hungry and no food awaited him. (Victim's account to researcher, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Toft, 1986:109)

"Mostly (he wasn't here much) it was him coming back late at night and getting me up to get something to eat and I'd refuse." (Victim, Northern Ireland. Evason, 1982:32)

"Say nine times out of ten it was because he was drinking. He'd come home from work about 11 pm drunk and complain about the dinner." (Victim, Australia. Deveson, 1978:113)

"He asked me to make him a cup of tea, and I was doing the party things. So I said, 'Well, wait a minute'. And he said, 'I told you to do it now'." (Victim, England. Pahl, 1985:31)

The husband had left [a] pig for his wife to look after while he was at a meeting on land matters. However, the wife failed to look after the pig properly and it got lost in the bush.... the husband returned . . . and found that the pig was lost. He was so angry that he started arguing with the wife. The wife did not reply properly, which made the husband even angrier.... he started hitting the wife with his hands. He then used an axe handle to beat her. (Student researcher's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Warus, 1986:58)

"You know [the children would] tell me to shut up. 'You're not going to tell me to shut up'. And then [my wife] would tell me, you know, 'Let me handle this'. I said, 'I'm the man of the house'. Then we'd start arguing. That's basically how they used to happen." (Batterer, USA. Ptacek, 1988:147)

"My disobedience. Not hopping to him immediately. If I'm late home and when I stick up for myself." (Victim, Australia. Deveson, 1978:113)

"I stopped her from going to see her parents, she threw a stone at me, so I beat her up." (Batterer, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Ekeroma, 1986:85)

I have heard a man speak approvingly of the beating of his own brother's daughter: "She talks too much and doesn't obey". (Ethnographer's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Chowning, 1985:80)

"She's going on and on about how much money we need . . . I'll listen to it for awhile, but then, you know, you gotta get up and do something, you know. That's the way I felt, the way to do it was go over and try to shut her up physically." (Batterer, USA. Ptacek, 1988:149)

"She spends money too much; I had only K10 while my wife spent K70 in five days." (Batterer, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Ekeroma, 1986:85)

A man stole his wife's money and went to gamble. When he lost, he came back asking for another K2 to go back and gamble with. The wife refused to give him the money, so he started hitting her. (Student researcher's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Wain, 1986:45)

She scolded him for taking girls around in his taxi, then he turned around and hit her. (Victim's account to researcher, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Ekeroma, 1986:86)

On Monday . . . she confronted [her husband] about [his affair with another woman]. She became angry and began scolding him in public. He became angry, picked up a piece of firewood, and hit her over the head with it. (Ethnographer's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Scaglion, 1990:194)

"He accused me of running around.... If I just looked at another man I was having an affair with him." (Victim, Australia. Deveson, 1978:113)

"He was jealous of me talking to three men at work." (Victim, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Ekeroma, 1986:85)

The first wife came late home from the garden and the husband was suspicious of her and asked why she was late. The wife explained but he did not believe her and he was so angry that he fought her. (Student researcher's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Apo, 1986:150)

"If I had my periods and I didn't want sex he used to bash me up." (Victim, *Australia*. Deveson, 1978:113)

[The husband's] frequent beatings of his middle-aged wife are said by some to be caused by her refusal of intercourse on the grounds that she is too old. (Ethnographer's account, *Rural Papua New Guinea*. Chowning, 1985:78)

"I didn't want to sleep with him that night . . . but I can please myself." (Victim, *Urban Papua New Guinea*. Ekeroma, 1986:85).

The most striking feature of these accounts, which span continent and context, is their *universality of meaning*. What unites them is the wife's, sometimes defiant, failure to do her husband's bidding and/or her questioning of his actions or authority, and the husband's attempt to beat her into submission. And just outside the frame of these accounts lies the edifice of expectations that husbands have concerning their wives' responsibilities to them. While the specific stresses that lead to wife beating are local and various, and signify richly textured cultural meanings, the *fundamental* theme is the same: the husband's assertion of his perceived right to make claims on and control his wife, and his corresponding denial of this right to his wife.

It may be, then, that wife beating requires, at base, a universal explanation. Bradley (1985) makes the following comments concerning the cause of wife beating in modern semi-urban Tolai society and its links with the traditional past:

Male control is the issue underlying violence against all Tolai wives, whether employed outside the home or not. While modern life has affected the circumstances which precipitate wife-beating (drunkenness, wives working outside the home, shortage of land and resources, etc.), at a deeper level the cause of wife-beating is the same now as it was in traditional times, namely the belief that it is a man's right to control his wife. This principle is supported by the bride-price system and by the whole complex of beliefs and practices that create and maintain the ideology of male superiority It is Tolai women's subordinate position in Tolai society, and especially within marriage, that is the ultimate cause of violence against Tolai wives. (Bradley, 1985:67)

Writers from other modernizing and industrialized societies have similarly argued that wife beating is concerned with male control and female subordination and have documented women's continued inequality within the family and society at large (e.g., Dobash and Dobash, 1980; Hegland, 1992; Lateef, 1992; Martin, 1981; Miller, 1992;

Schechter, 1982, ch.9.)⁸. Developing Bradley's comment, then, at this "deeper level" it can be argued that wife beating "is the same" whether in past or present Tolai society, rural or urban societies of Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the "developing" world, or in fully industrialized countries like the USA, UK, and Australia.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from Papua New Guinea does not support the hypothesis that modernization necessarily increases wife beating. However, the nature of men's violence to wives does appear to be changing in significant ways. These findings are not surprising, given Levinson's (1989:63-66) conclusion, arrived at from his cross-cultural research, that social change can have a variety of effects on family violence - increasing or decreasing its prevalence, altering its definitions, and/or changing its forms - and that its short and longer term consequences may be contradictory. Indeed, men's right to control their wives through beating them has a long history in most Papua New Guinean social structures, predating contact with Westerners, a fact ignored by modernization hypotheses that imply an absence of wife beating in traditional societies. Any understanding of the impact of modernization on wife beating in Papua New Guinea must start with this reality.

The evidence examined in this paper suggests that the effects of modernization on wife beating are mediated through their impact on women's material and ideological status. Because this impact is complex, one would expect modernization's effect on wife beating also to be complex. A new sensitivity to the issue appears to be developing in the modernizing context, especially among women, and the tensions arising from the political context of kinship are lessening. But traditional constraints on excess and access to redress are eroding, creating new vulnerabilities. Men's alcohol consumption may exacerbate their own feelings of injury and women's greater independence may play on men's suspicions of sexual infidelity. But at the root of these problems lie men's continuing motivation to control their wives and a social structure that allows them to do so. At this root level, both urban and traditional Papua New Guinea would seem to have much in common with other societies in the "developing" and industrialized world.

⁸ Counts (1990b:238-239) implicitly questions the universality of this kind of explanation for wife beating in her conclusion to the special issue of *Pacific Studies* on "Domestic Violence in Oceania," by pointing to ethnographic accounts of severe wife beating in two societies where "political near-equality exists between women and men." However, assessing these ethnographic accounts is difficult since the descriptions given of gender relations and women's status are, of necessity, not systematic or detailed enough to allow firm conclusions concerning the issue of equality. As Levinson (1989:69-71) suggests, sexual inequality is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Indeed, Nero's (1990) account of one of the two societies - the Palau - actually provides evidence that women's status is somewhat contradictory (women clearly have real spheres of sexual autonomy and political and economic power, but they also suffer from labour market segregation, male predominance in formal politics, strong gender typing in socialization, a sexual double standard, and a history of polygyny), despite her rejection of explanations based on structural inequalities and power differentials on the grounds that the status of Palauan women is high. Moreover, she argues that wife beating in Palau may be related to women's increased equality in the public sphere leading to frustration and insecurity in men who may attempt "to establish power over their wives through physical domination" (p.87-88). This suggests that struggles over domination, subordination and inequality are very much to the point. As I argue in this paper, the relationship between wife beating and women's status is unlikely to be a simple, linear one (see also Yilo, 1984; Levinson, 1989:75). Levinson (1989:72-76) concludes that male control of wealth and property is the underlying cause of wife beating, but that economic inequality is strongly mediated by inequality in domestic decision-making, the "single most powerful predictor of wife-beating frequency" (p.73) in his study.

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